A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED at the OPENING

OF THE

ROYAL ACADEMY,

JANUARY 2, 1769,

BY THE

PRESIDENT.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

TO THE

MEMBERS

OF THE

ROYAL ACADEMY.

GENTLEMEN,

THAT you have ordered the publication of this diſcourſe, is not only very flattering to me, as it implies your approbation of the method of ſtudy which I have recommended; but likewiſe, as this method receives, from that act, ſuch an additional weight and authority, as demands from the Students, that deference and reſpect, which can be due only to the united ſenſe of ſo conſiderable a BODY of ARTISTS.

I am,

With the greateſt eſteem and reſpect,

GENTLEMEN,

Your moſt humble,

and obedient Servant,

JOSHUA REYNOLDS.

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DISCOURSE, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

AN Academy, in which the Polite Arts may be regularly cultivated, is at laſt opened among us by ROYAL Munificence. This muſt appear an event in the higheſt degree intereſting, not only to the Artiſts, but to the whole nation.

IT is indeed difficult to give any other reaſon, why an empire like that of BRITAIN, ſhould ſo long have wanted an ornament ſo ſuitable to its greatneſs, than that ſlow progreſſion of things, which naturally makes elegance and refinement the laſt effect of opulence and power.

An Inſtitution like this has often been recommended upon conſiderations merely mercantile; but an Academy, founded upon ſuch principles, can never effect even its own narrow purpoſes; if it has an origin no higher, no taſte can ever be formed in it, which can be uſeful even in manufactures; but if the higher Arts of Deſign flouriſh, theſe inferior ends will be anſwered of courſe.

We are happy in having a Prince, who has conceived the deſign of ſuch an Inſtitution, according to its true dignity; and promotes the Arts, as the head of a great, a learned, a polite, and a commercial nation; and I can now congratulate you, Gentlemen, on the accompliſhment of your long and ardent wiſhes.

The numberleſs and ineffectual conſultations that I have had with many in this aſſembly, to form plans and concert ſchemes for an Academy, afford a ſufficient proof of the impoſſibility of ſucceeding but by the influence of Majesty. But there have, perhaps, been times, when even the influence of Majesty would have been ineffectual; and it is pleaſing to reflect, that we are thus embodied, when every circumſtance ſeems to concur from which honour and proſperity can probably ariſe.

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THERE are, at this time, a greater number of excellent Artiſts than were ever known before at one period in this nation; there is a general deſire among our Nobility to be diſtinguiſhed as Lovers and Judges of the Arts; there is a greater ſuperfluity of wealth among the people to reward the profeſſors; and, above all, we are patronized by a MONARCH, who, knowing the value of ſcience and of elegance, thinks every Art worthy of his notice, that tends to ſoften and humaniſe the mind.

IT has been obſerved, that the ARTS have ever been diſpoſed to travel weſtward. *Greece* is thought to have received them from her more eaſtern neighbours. From the *Greeks* they migrated into *Italy*; from thence they viſited *France*, *Flanders*, and *Holland*, enlightening, for a time, thoſe countries, though with diminiſhed luſtre; but, as if the ocean had ſtopped their progreſs, they have for near an age ſtood ſtill, and grown weak and torpid for want of motion. Let us for a moment flatter ourſelves that they are ſtill in being, and have at laſt arrived at this iſland. Our MONARCH ſeems willing to think ſo, having provided ſuch an Aſylum for their reception, as may induce them to ſtay where they are ſo much honoured.

AFTER ſo much has been done by HIS MAJESTY, it will be wholly our fault, if our progreſs is not in ſome degree correſpondent to the wiſdom and generoſity of the Inſtitution; let us ſhew our gratitude in our diligence, that, though our merit may not anſwer his expectations, yet, at leaſt, our induſtry may deſerve his protection.

BUT whatever may be our proportion of ſucceſs, of this we may be ſure, that the preſent Inſtitution, will at leaſt contribute to advance our knowledge of the Arts, and bring us nearer to that ideal excellence, which it is the lot of Genius, always to contemplate and never to attain.

THE principal advantage of an Academy is, that, beſides furniſhing able men to direct the Student, it will be a repoſitory for the great examples of the Art. Theſe are the materials on which Genius is to work, and without which the ſtrongeſt intellect may be fruitleſly or deviouſly employed. By ſtudying theſe authentick models, thoſe beauties which are the reſult of the accumulated experience of paſt ages may be at once acquired, and the tardy and obſtructed progreſs of our predeceſſors, may teach us a ſhorter and eaſier way. The Student receives, at one glance, the

principles

principles which many Artiſts have ſpent their whole lives in aſcertaining; and, ſatisfied with their effect, is ſpared the painful inveſtigation by which they come to be known and fixed. How many men of great natural abilities have been loſt to this nation, for want of theſe advantages? They never had an opportunity of ſeeing thoſe maſterly efforts of Genius, which at once kindle the whole ſoul, and force it into ſudden and irreſiſtible approbation.

RAFFAELLE, it is true, had not the advantage of ſtudying in an Academy; but all *Rome*, and the works of MICHAEL ANGELO in particular, were to him an Academy. On the ſight of the CAPELLA SISTINA, he immediately from a dry, Gothic, and even inſipid manner, which attends to the minute accidental diſcriminations of particular and individual objects, aſſumed that grand ſtyle of Painting, which unites preciſion and correctneſs with the general and invariable ideas of nature.

EVERY ſeminary of learning may be ſaid to be ſurrounded with an atmoſphere of floating knowledge, where every mind may gather ſomewhat congenial to its own original conceptions. Knowledge, thus obtained, has always ſomething more popular and uſeful than that which is forced

upon the mind by private precepts, or ſolitary meditation. Beſides, it is generally found, that a youth more eaſily receives inſtruction from the companions of his ſtudies, whoſe minds are nearly on a level with his own, than from thoſe who are much his ſuperiors; and it is from his equals only that he catches the fire of emulation which will not a little contribute to his advancement.

But it is needleſs to enumerate all the benefits that will reſult from this Inſtitution. The world ſeems already ſatisfied, that the Arts muſt be protected in order to flouriſh; at leaſt, I believe, this aſſembly will not be diſpoſed to think them unworthy of the regard and protection with which His Majesty has been pleaſed to honour them.

One advantage, I will venture to affirm, we ſhall have, which no other nation can boaſt; we ſhall have nothing to unlearn. To this praiſe the preſent race of Artiſts have a juſt claim; as far as they have yet proceeded they are right. With us the exertions of Genius will henceforward be directed to their proper objects; it will not be as it has been in other ſchools, where he that travelled faſteſt, only wandered fartheſt from the right way.

IMPRESSED, as I am, therefore, with ſuch a favourable opinion of my aſſociates in this undertaking, it would ill become me to dictate to any of them; but as theſe Inſtitutions have ſo often failed in other nations; and as it is natural to think with regret, how much might have been done, and how little has been done, I muſt take leave to offer a few hints, by which thoſe errors may be rectified, and thoſe defects ſupplied. Theſe the Profeſſors and Viſitors may reject or adopt as they ſhall think proper.

I WOULD chiefly recommend, that an implicit obedience to the *Rules of Art*, as eſtabliſhed by the practice of the great MASTERS, ſhould be exacted from the young Students. That thoſe models, which have paſſed through the approbation of ages, ſhould be conſidered by them as perfect and infallible Guides, as ſubjects for their imitation, not their criticiſm.

I AM confident, that this is the only efficacious method of making a progreſs in the Arts, and that he who ſets out with doubting, will find life finiſhed before he becomes maſter of the rudiments. For it may be laid down as a maxim, that he who begins by preſuming on his own ſenſe,

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has ended his ſtudies as ſoon as he has commenced them. Every opportunity, therefore, ſhould be taken to diſcountenance that falſe and vulgar opinion, that rules are the fetters of Genius; they are fetters only to men of no Genius; as that armour, which upon the ſtrong becomes an ornament and a defence, upon the weak and misſhapen turns into a load, and cripples the body which it was made to protect.

How much liberty may be taken to break through thoſe rules, and, as the Poet expreſſes it,

To ſnatch a Grace beyond the reach of Art,

may be an after conſideration, when the pupils become maſters themſelves. It is then, when their Genius has received its utmoſt improvement, that rules may be diſpenſed with; but let us not deſtroy the ſcaffold until we have raiſed the building.

The Directors ought more particularly to watch over the Genius of thoſe Students, who, being more advanced, are arrived at that critical period of ſtudy, on the nice management of which their future turn of taſte depends.

At that age it is natural for them to be more captivated with what is brilliant than with what is ſolid, and to prefer ſplendid negligence to painful and humiliating exactneſs.

A facility in compoſing, a lively, and what is called a maſterly handling the chalk or pencil, are, it muſt be confeſſed, captivating qualities to young minds, and become of courſe the objects of their ambition; they endeavour to imitate thoſe dazzling excellences, which they will find no great labour in attaining. After much time ſpent in theſe frivolous purſuits, the difficulty will be to retreat; but it will be then too late; and there is ſcarce an inſtance of return to ſcrupulous labour, after the mind has been relaxed and debauched by theſe delightful trifles.

By this uſeleſs induſtry they are excluded from all power of advancing in real excellence. Whilſt Boys, they are arrived at their utmoſt perfection; they have taken the ſhadow for the ſubſtance, and make that mechanical facility, the chief excellence of the Art, which is only an ornament, and of the merit of which few but painters themſelves are judges.

This ſeems to me to be one of the moſt dangerous ſources of corruption; and I ſpeak of it from experience, not as an error which may poſſibly happen, but which has actually infected all foreign Academies. The directors were probably pleaſed with this premature dexterity in their pupils, and praiſed their diſpatch at the expence of their correctneſs.

But young men have not only this frivolous ambition of being thought maſterly inciting them on one hand, but alſo their natural ſloth tempting them on the other; they are terrified at the proſpect before them, of the toil required to attain exactneſs; the impetuoſity of youth is diſguſted at the ſlow approaches of a regular ſiege, and deſires, from mere impatience of labour, to take the citadel by ſtorm. They wiſh to find ſome ſhorter path to excellence, and hope to obtain the reward of eminence by other means, than thoſe which the indiſpenſable rules of Art have preſcribed. They muſt therefore be told again and again, that labour is the only price of ſolid fame, and that whatever their force of Genius may be, there is no eaſy method of becoming a good Painter.

When we read the lives of the moſt eminent Painters, every page informs us, that no part of their time was ſpent in diſſipation; even an increaſe of fame ſerved only to augment their induſtry. To be convinced with what perſevering aſſiduity they purſued their ſtudies, we need only reflect on their method of proceeding in their moſt celebrated works. When they conceived a ſubject, they firſt made a variety of ſketches, then a finiſhed drawing of the whole; after that a more correct drawing of every ſeparate part, heads, hands, feet, and pieces of drapery; they then painted the picture, and after all re-touched it from the life. The pictures, thus wrought with ſuch pain, now appear like the effect of enchantment, and as if ſome mighty Genius had ſtruck them off at a blow.

But, whilſt diligence is thus recommended to the Students, the Viſitors will take care that their diligence be effectual, that it be well directed, and employed on the proper object. A Student is not always advancing becauſe he is employed; he muſt apply his ſtrength to that part of the Art where the real difficulties lie, to that part which diſtinguiſhes it as a liberal Art, and not by miſtaken induſtry loſe his time in that which is merely ornamental. The Students, inſtead of vying

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with each other which ſhall have the readieſt hand, ſhould be taught to contend who ſhall have the pureſt and moſt correct out-line; inſtead of ſtriving which ſhall produce the brighteſt tint, or, curiouſly trifling, endeavour to give the gloſs of ſtuffs, ſo as to appear real, let their ambition be directed to contend, which ſhall diſpoſe his drapery in the moſt graceful folds, which ſhall give the moſt grace and dignity to the human figure.

I MUST beg leave to ſubmit one thing more to the conſideration of the Viſitors, which appears to me a matter of very great conſequence, and the omiſſion of which I think a principal defect in the method of education purſued in all the Academies I have ever viſited. The error I mean is, that the Students never draw exactly from the living models which they have before them. It is not indeed their intention, nor are they directed to do it. Their drawings reſemble the model only in the attitude. They change the form according to their vague and uncertain ideas of beauty, and make a drawing rather of what they think the figure ought to be, then of what it appears. I have thought this the obſtacle, that has ſtopt the progreſs of many young men of real Genius; and I very much doubt, whether a habit of drawing correctly what we ſee, will not give a

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proportionable power of drawing correctly what we imagine. He who endeavours to copy nicely the figure before him, not only acquires a habit of exactneſs and preciſion, but is continually advancing in his knowledge of the human figure; and though he ſeems to ſuperficial obſervers to make a ſlower progreſs, he will be found at laſt capable of adding (without running into capricious wildneſs) that grace and beauty, which is neceſſary to be given to his more finiſhed works, and which cannot be got by the moderns, as it was not acquired by the ancients, but by an attentive and well compared ſtudy of the human form.

WHAT I think ought to enforce this method is, that it has been the practice (as may be ſeen by their drawings) of the great Maſters in the Art. I will mention a drawing of RAFFAELLE, *The Diſpute of the Sacrament*, the print of which, by Count CAILUS, is in every hand. It appears, that he made his ſketch from one model; and the habit he had of drawing exactly from the form before him, appears by his making all the figures with the ſame cap, ſuch as his model then happened to wear; ſo ſervile a copyiſt was this great man, even at a time when he was allowed to be at his higheſt pitch of excellence.

I HAVE ſeen alſo Academy figures by ANNIBALE CARACCI, though he was often ſufficiently licentious in his finiſhed works, drawn with all the peculiarities of an individual model.

THIS ſcrupulous exactneſs is ſo contrary to the practice of the Academies, that it is not without great deference, that I beg leave to recommend it to the conſideration of the Viſitors, and ſubmit it to them, whether the neglect of this method, is not one of the reaſons why Students ſo often diſappoint expectation, and, being more than boys at ſixteen, become leſs than men at thirty.

IN ſhort, this method can only be detrimental when there are but few living forms to copy; for then Students, by always drawing from one alone, will by habit be taught to overlook defects, and miſtake deformity for beauty. But of this objection there is no danger; ſince the Council has determined to ſupply the Academy with a variety of ſubjects; and indeed thoſe laws which they have drawn up, and which the Secretary will preſently read for your confirmation, have in ſome meaſure precluded me from ſaying more upon this occaſion. Inſtead, therefore, of offering my advice, permit

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me to indulge my Wiſhes, and expreſs my Hope, that this Inſtitution may anſwer the expectations of its ROYAL FOUNDER; that the preſent age may vie in ARTS with that of LEO the Tenth; and that *the dignity of the dying Art* (to make uſe of an expreſſion of PLINY) may be revived under the Reign of GEORGE THE THIRD.

FINIS.